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Yiddish and its Fringe Benefits

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Growing up in a town almost completely devoid of religious Jews, my knowledge of Judaism was rather limited. I knew there was a language called *Yiddish*, having heard a few phrases here and there from my parents and grandparents. However, I was led to believe that it was a dead language that had been used in the 'old country' before the Holocaust but was no longer spoken.

In 1974 though, a casual event took place which radically altered my perception, At that time, I was studying Pharmacy in Sunderland, a small seaside town in northeast England, and while there was a frequent visitor to the office of the late Rabbi Yehuda Refson. I happened to be present when Rabbi Benzion Shem Tov, a famous elder Chabad chasid, walked into the office. He asked R. Yehuda if he could use the phone to call the Headquarters of Lubavitch UK in London. He then dialed the main line number and when the secretary answered, Rabbi Shem Tov began speaking to her in Yiddish.

I was absolutely dumbfounded, wondering how he could possibly know that the person on the other end of the line knew Yiddish too. It was not so long ago that Rabbi Shem Tov had left Russia so it was logical that he knew the language, but if it was no longer in use then how could it be that a secretary in the UK in the year 1974 could understand him?

It was to be 4 years until, arriving in Kfar Chabad,¹ I came to realize that Yiddish was actually very much alive and was still a universal language. Nevertheless, the experience that day in Sunderland helped me understand the shock of a UK taxi driver whose story was told in one of the local Jewish newspapers.

This driver lived in the south of England some 150 kilometers outside London and the only thing he knew about Judaism was the fact that he was Jewish. His parents were Holocaust survivors and he had heard them speak to his grandparents in Yiddish, but he understood very little. He asked his parents how come Yiddish was the grandparents' native tongue and they told him that before the Holocaust that was the language spoken by Jews in Eastern Europe. They went on to explain that at the end of the war there were almost no Jews left in the world. The few survivors came to the West and spoke English etc. or went to Israel and spoke Hebrew. Yiddish had thus become extinct. He was living in a totally non-Jewish environment, so he didn't question it.

Many years later it happened that his passengers wanted to be driven up to London to a section where he had never been, called Golders Green. After he had dropped them off, while still in Golders Green, he was approached and asked if he might be going near Stamford Hill, another area he had never been to.

He looked it up on his A to Z of London and said "Yes, I see it is indeed on my route as I head back South." So, the enquirer asked him if he could take three young children to an address in Stamford Hill. He explained that something had happened with their transport arrangements and so they were stranded.

¹ Where we were next-door neighbors in the Absorption Center there, having both made aliyah with our wives on almost the exact same date. -- YT

On the journey he heard the children talking to each other. At first he paid little attention to their chatter, until he realized they were speaking in Yiddish! He pinched himself. Was he dreaming? Could these young children in modern day Britain in the year 1980 really be speaking an extinct pre-war language?

Unable to contain his curiosity, he waited until he had dropped off the children at their school in Stamford Hill, and then entered the school and asked to speak to the headmaster. He wanted to know how it could be that those kids were speaking Yiddish if the language was dead. Furthermore, what were the long white strings that the headmaster and those around him had sticking out of their trousers, and why did they all have a night cap on their heads.

The headmaster of the Chabad day school took him into his office and answered his questions one by one. "We all speak Yiddish here and we are all religious Jews living among many thousands of similar religious Yiddish speaking Jews". He explained the significance of *Tzitzit* and *Yarmulke* and concluded with, "My dear friend, Judaism is alive and well and so is Yiddish."

Thus, began the taxi driver's journey back to his roots. Eventually he became a fully religious Chabad chasid living in Stamford Hill, married and founder of a true Jewish home; and all because of the Yiddish language. He was often heard to point to his *Tzitzit* and say with a smile "this is the fringe benefit of my first-ever fare into Stamford Hill."

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Source: Adapted by Yerachmiel Tilles from the Cass original.

**Rabbi Yaakov Cass** is a Lubavitcher chossid living in Jerusalem. Until recently he was a senior official in the Israel Ministry of Health.

Author's endnotes:

\* The moral of the story is clear. We are all emissaries of the One Above, never knowing who is watching, who is listening and what affect we have on our fellows.

\*\* This story is dedicated to the memory of Rabbi Yehuda Refson, who passed away from the Corona virus a few months ago.\*\*\* When I was a student he often invited me into his house, overwhelming me with hospitality. One particular incident has remained with me on my journey through life.

When the Rabbi would see me in *shul*, he would always ask me to join him for Shabbat lunch. One time I was not there because I was unwell. Rav Yehuda, instead of returning home to make *Kiddush*, walked from one side of Sunderland to my apartment on the other side to find out what happened.

I told him that I had flu and worse, I was freezing cold because the heater in my room had stopped working. He promptly went downstairs to the non-Jewish neighbor and told him that I needed help. The neighbor came upstairs and fixed the heating.

The Rabbi asked if I wanted to eat but I declined and then he returned home.

To my great surprise, on Saturday night after Shabbat my doctor knocked at the door. Rav Yehuda had sent him to check up on me to make sure that I was OK.

**May his memory be for a blessing.**

\*\*\* Dayan Rabbi Yehuda Yaakov Refson, a veteran Chabad-Lubavitch emissary in Leeds, England, rabbi of the Shomrei Hadass Synagogue, director of the Leeds Menorah School and longtime head of the regional *beth din*, passed away on Sunday night [Adar 26 / March 22, 2020]. He was 73 years old. (from *chabad.org*)

*Connection:* the end of the Torah Reading of Shelach (this week in Israel, next week in Diaspora) is the source for the commandment for men to put the special fringes (*tzitzit*) on four-cornered garments.